

Perceptions of Marital Conflict from 9 Months to 7.5 Years Postpartum

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to better understand sources of couple conflict in families with young children by examining 65 dual-earner mothers’ and fathers’ responses to the Marital Agendas Protocol (MAP) (Notarius & Vanzetti, 1983) survey at nine months and seven and a half years after the birth of their first child.



BACKGROUND

- The quality of a couple’s romantic relationship is the foundation for their co-parenting relationship (Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Frosch, & McHale, 2004).
- Typically, after the birth of their first child, a couple will experience an overall decrease in both marital satisfaction and quality (Kluwer, 2010).
- When compared to mothers of older children and fathers of children of all ages, mothers with infants report the highest ratings of dissatisfaction with the romantic relationship with their partner (Meyer, Robinson, Cohn, Gildenblatt, & Barkley, 2016).
- Also, the perceptions of fairness in the division of labor by wives is the strongest predictor of the level of conflict in the marriage for both husbands and wives (Perry-Jenkins & Folk, 1994).
- This study focused on dual-earner couples that were either married or cohabiting and expecting their first biological child. The couple members were given the Martial Agendas Protocol (MAP) where they were asked to rate fourteen potential relationship issues on a scale from 0-100.
- Although previous research has examined conflict surrounding household tasks and the division of labor, less is known about how couples rank specific sources of conflict (i.e., time spent together, money, jealousy/trust, sex). This study fills this gap by looking more closely at the specific sources of conflict in marital relationships across the years of early parenthood.

AIM

The purpose of my study is to answer three important questions:

- 1) Are mothers’ and fathers’ ratings of problematic issues in their relationships stable over time or do they change over their children’s development?
- 2) Are there gender differences between mothers’ and fathers’ ratings of problematic issues in their relationships?
- 3) Are couple members’ ratings of problematic issues in their relationship associated?

METHOD

The New Parents Project (NPP) followed first-time expectant couples from the third trimester of pregnancy to seven and a half years postpartum. NPP aimed to gain knowledge on factors that impact mothers’ and fathers’ adjustment to parenthood.

- Data collected in this study came from the 9 month and 7.5 year assessments; however there were a total of six phases.
- There were 65 couples included in this study.
- The majority of the participants were married, Caucasian, educated and have a relatively high socioeconomic status.
- At each assessment, each couple member completed the MAP questionnaire, which required them to rank 14 potential relationship issues as sources of conflict on a scale from 0-100.
- We compared both couples and individuals to themselves at two points in time using paired samples t-tests and paired samples correlations.
- The top six issues were determined by looking at the means.

Comparing Mothers and Fathers at Nine Months

TOP 6 MARITAL ISSUES AT NINE MONTHS POSTPARTUM			
	Issue Ranked #1-6	Mean	Standard Deviation
MOTHERS			
1	Money	33.01	25.824
2	Work/Careers	25.79	22.897
3	Sex	25.13	20.332
4	Time Spent Together	24.90	21.783
5	Communication	24.29	20.012
6	Household Tasks	22.77	18.421
FATHERS			
1	Money	33.92	24.995
2	Work/Careers	26.98	22.553
3	Sex	25.26	23.408
4	Household Tasks	25.15	19.334
5	Communication	24.39	20.245
6	Time Spent Together	24.17	21.409

Comparing Mothers and Fathers at Seven and a Half Years

TOP 6 MARITAL ISSUES AT SEVEN AND A HALF YEARS POSTPARTUM			
	Issue Ranked #1-6	Mean	Standard Deviation
MOTHERS			
1	Communication	38.21	25.567
2	Time Spent Together	34.00	25.761
3	Money	32.29	26.942
4	Household Tasks	28.43	22.174
5	In-Laws	27.14	23.646
6	Sex	27.14	26.176
FATHERS			
1	Communication	35.79	23.981
2	Money	33.93	25.394
3	Time Spent Together	33.02	21.158
4	Sex	29.64	25.556
5	Household Tasks	28.10	20.432
6	In-Laws	25.93	24.558

Comparing Mothers Over Time

COMPARING MOTHERS TO MOTHERS			
	Issue Ranked #1-6	Mean	Standard Deviation
9 MONTHS			
1	Money	33.01	25.824
2	Work/Careers	25.79	22.897
3	Sex	25.13	20.332
4	Time Spent Together	24.90	21.783
5	Communication	24.29	20.012
6	Household Tasks	22.77	18.421
7.5 YEARS			
1	Communication	38.21	25.567
2	Time Spent Together	34.00	25.761
3	Money	32.29	26.942
4	Household Tasks	28.43	22.174
5	In-Laws	27.14	23.646
6	Sex	27.14	26.176

RESULTS

- Mothers reported commitment, communication, child, household tasks, jealousy and trust, and time spent together to be significantly more of a problem at seven and a half years than nine months postpartum ($t(64)$ ranged from -2.19 - -4.84, $p < .05$).
- Fathers reported communication, child, jealousy and trust, and time spent together to be significantly more of a problem at seven and a half years than at nine months postpartum ($t(64)$ ranged from -2.28 to -3.78, $p < .05$).
- When comparing mothers to fathers at nine months after the birth of their first child, fathers reported friends to be significantly more of a problem in the relationship at that time ($t(154) = -1.98$, $p < .05$).
- Couple members’ ratings of problematic issues were significantly correlated with each other within the same time point. This was true of all issues with the exception of “friends” at seven and a half years postpartum ($\eta^2 = -.01$, $p > .05$).
- When comparing mothers to fathers at seven and a half years postpartum, there were no significant differences found.



Comparing Fathers Over Time

COMPARING FATHERS TO FATHERS			
	Issue Ranked #1-6	Mean	Standard Deviation
9 MONTHS			
1	Money	33.92	24.995
2	Work/Careers	26.98	22.553
3	Sex	25.26	23.408
4	Household Tasks	25.15	19.334
5	Communication	24.39	20.245
6	Time Spent Together	24.17	21.409
7.5 YEARS			
1	Communication	35.79	23.981
2	Money	33.93	25.394
3	Time Spent Together	33.02	21.158
4	Sex	29.64	25.556
5	Household Tasks	28.10	20.432
6	In-Laws	25.93	24.558

CONCLUSIONS

- Issues of commitment and communication seem to become more pronounced over time for both mothers and fathers.
- We found very few gender differences. There were more differences between parents’ own reports at time one and time two than between mothers’ and fathers’ reports at the same time point.
- For both couple members, “work/careers” was reported to be an issue at nine months, but not at seven and a half years, although money was a consistent problem. This may be due to the fact that couple members became more comfortable in their career roles as time passed, but financial stability was still a source of stress.
- A problem that was introduced at seven and a half years for both mothers and fathers was “in-laws.” Perhaps this is because the grandparents transitioned into late adulthood and may be suffering with medical issues. Or, the level of involvement from the in-laws (i.e., they are too involved or they do not help enough) became a source of stress as the child develops, or as the couple had more children.
- A problem that increased in significance by seven and a half years is “time spent together.” As the child grows, they are likely to become involved in extracurricular activities and the couple may have additional children to care for. So, finding time away from the children, work, and household tasks may become more difficult as the child ages.
- Overall, couples tended to agree on issues that were a problem in their relationship, as well as their level of severity

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